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## Regulatory fit at work: gravitational effects and associations with employee well-being

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### ABSTRACT

Using a task approach, this study examined the extent to which employee regulatory focus would “gravitate” employees towards promotion- versus prevention-oriented tasks within their jobs, and whether a subsequent regulatory fit/misfit would be associated with their well-being (i.e., mental health and job satisfaction). In a pre-study among 37 employees, we determined the regulatory focus of work tasks from the Netherlands Skill Survey, which are relevant to the general working population, resulting in a selection of 7 promotion and 11 prevention tasks. For our main study, we used the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel and collected data from 1,606 respondents. In 2011, we collected respondents’ regulatory focus and in 2012, we collected their work tasks and well-being. Promotion-oriented employees considered both promotion and prevention tasks to be highly relevant in their jobs, and this relevance was associated with their mental health. Prevention-oriented employees, however, did not respond to the relevance of promotion or prevention tasks and generally reported lower well-being, irrespective of the regulatory focus of their tasks. We tentatively conclude that promotion focus gravitates employees towards job with a richer task content, containing both promotion and prevention tasks.

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### KEYWORDS

Regulatory focus; regulatory fit; mental health; employee well-being

The concept of job gravitation refers to labour market behaviour whereby employees, self or employer initiated, sort themselves into jobs that are compatible with their interests, values, and abilities (McCormick, DeNisi, & Slaw, 1979; McCormick, Jeanneret, & Mecham, 1972; Wilk, Desmarais, & Sackett, 1995). Job gravitation is closely related to the concept of person-job fit, which refers to a match between employees’ personal characteristics and their jobs (e.g., Edwards, 1991) within the broader domain of person-organization fit (e.g., Kristof, 1996). Although not all employees may be equally able to find jobs that closely fit with their personal characteristics (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), gravitation theory would assume that individuals who experience a poor job fit would be induced to search for other work, in the hope of obtaining a better fit (Wilk et al., 1995; Wilk & Sackett, 1996). Hence, over time employees should generally move towards jobs that offer a better fit.

It has been found that person-job fit has a number of relevant outcomes for employees and organizations, such as job satisfaction, performance, organizational attraction, job selection, and intention to remain within the organization (see for a review Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Considering the implications for employees’ functioning in their work and career, it is important to gain more insight into the mechanisms that underlie a match between employee characteristics and their jobs, and associations with employee well-being. The current study aims to examine these mechanisms, in relation to employee well-being, by connecting the concept of job gravitation to regulation focus theory (Higgins, 1997).

Regulatory focus theory differentiates between two motivational foci that guide individuals’ goal attainment activities: (1) a promotion focus, whereby individuals aim to satisfy achievement and growth needs, and use approach strategies to maximize positive outcomes and (2) a prevention focus, whereby individuals aim to satisfy safety and security needs, and use avoidance strategies to minimize negative outcomes. Brockner and Higgins (2001) underline the importance of conducting research on regulatory focus in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology. They argue that regulatory focus theory can explain a variety of emotions and behaviours at the workplace that relate to the consequences of person-organization fit, such as goal-setting behaviours and resistance to change.

Based on regulatory focus theory, one can indeed expect that employees’ dominant regulation focus may guide goal-directed behaviour in the domain of work and career. In particular, employees would strive for regulatory fit in their work (Higgins, 2000), that is, they would strive for a match between their personal regulatory focus and the regulatory focus that the tasks within their jobs require. Some tasks may involve a focus on achievement, growth, and the promotion of positive outcomes (i.e., promotion tasks), whereas other tasks would require a focus on safety, security, and the prevention of negative outcomes (i.e., prevention tasks; Beudeker, 2015; Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). Therefore, we aim to investigate to what extent employees’ regulatory focus is associated with the relevance of promotion- and prevention-oriented tasks in their job. Although gravitation theory would predict that individuals

move over time towards jobs that offer a better regulatory fit (Wilk et al., 1995; Wilk & Sackett, 1996), not all employees may be able to obtain a job that offers optimal fit with their personal regulatory orientation. Consequently, we also examine the interaction effects between employees' regulatory focus and the relevance of promotion- and prevention-oriented tasks (i.e., regulatory fit/misfit) on employee well-being, in terms of mental health complaints and job satisfaction.

By approaching person-job fit from a regulatory focus perspective, we will further our theoretical understanding of the antecedents and consequences of person-job fit in relation to more fundamental, motivational principles that guide human behaviour (Higgins, 1997). Although experimental research has been conducted on regulatory fit in relation to motivation and performance (e.g., Freitas & Higgins, 2002), field studies that address regulatory fit in relation to employee functioning are to our knowledge very scarce (see Petrou, Demerouti, & Häfner, 2015). By relating regulatory fit to mental health and job satisfaction – variables that are linked to organizational performance (Ford, Cerasoli, Higgins, & Decesare, 2011; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001) – this study is also relevant from a practical viewpoint.

### **Regulatory focus of employees**

In his regulatory focus theory, Higgins (1997) challenged and extended the basic principle according to which individuals strive for pleasure and avoid pain. Higgins stated that individuals approach pleasure and avoid pain in different ways. Individuals with a promotion focus would be mainly concerned with fulfilling their "ideal self", their hopes and aspirations. They would focus on possibilities for growth, development, and maximization of positive outcomes, using approach strategies. Individuals with a prevention focus would primarily strive to fulfil their "ought self", their obligations and responsibilities. They would focus on security, safety, and a minimization of negative outcomes, using avoidance strategies. Higgins (1997) proposed that regulatory focus is strongly influenced by early socialization experiences with caretakers, but may be temporarily influenced by momentary situations (e.g., Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). It is also important to note that promotion and prevention focus are considered orthogonal constructs, that is, individuals may score high on both foci, they may score high on one focus, or low on both foci (Higgins, 2002).

### **Regulatory focus of tasks**

In the field of person-job fit, many studies have been conducted with a focus on employees' job or occupation (see e.g., Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). However, it has been argued that a focus on workers' tasks, instead of their job or occupation, is becoming increasingly important due to recent changes in technology, globalization, and the composition of the workforce (Ter Weel & Kok, 2013). These changes have resulted in shifts in the allocation of workers across tasks and occupations. In addition, it has been argued that management in organizations can no longer design jobs in a top-down manner, but would need flexible jobs which allow employees to

change and develop tasks and roles proactively (Grant & Parker, 2009). For these reasons, this study uses a task approach to examine how employees with different regulatory foci view their job.

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) postulates that the benefits of a specific regulatory focus hinges on the fit between an individual's focus and his/her environment, the so-called regulatory fit (Higgins, 2005). Regulatory fit occurs when individuals can engage in behaviours or use goal attainment strategies that are congruent with their personal regulatory focus (Aaker & Lee, 2006; Avnet & Higgins, 2006). Scholars have argued that within organizations, task environments which demand for safety and vigilance behaviours/strategies would offer regulatory fit to those with a prevention focus, whereas task environments that require growth behaviours/strategies would offer regulatory fit to those with a promotion focus (e.g., Beudeker, 2015; Petrou et al., 2015). Furthermore, it has been proposed that some task environments would ask for a dual focus. For example, Brockner, Higgins, and Low (2004) argue that a high promotion and high prevention focus would be required for entrepreneurs, who have to be both creative and alert to danger. Regulatory fit can therefore be seen as a specific form of person-environment, or person-job fit, whereby the regulatory focus of an employee matches with the required focus, in terms of behaviours and strategies, of his/her tasks.

Focusing on the required *input* of tasks, Van Dijk and Kluger (2011) examined whether there are indeed tasks that require promotion tendencies, meaning that they ask for employee enthusiasm, openness, creativity and eagerness, and tasks that require prevention tendencies, such as employee vigilance, attention to detail, and adherence to rules. After having developed a comprehensive list of tasks that people usually perform in their work, they found evidence for this notion, with some tasks (e.g., those requiring creativity) being primarily viewed as promotion oriented, while other tasks (e.g., those requiring vigilance) were viewed as prevention oriented.

In addition to the required input for a task, Beudeker (2015; see also Beudeker, Rink, Ellemers, & Blonk, 2013) recommends to take the *output* of a specific task into account as well. For promotion-oriented tasks, good performance would have a clear positive effect on the organization, whereas poor performance is hardly visible (Beudeker, 2015). For prevention-oriented tasks, good performance is difficult to discern, whereas poor performance would have a pronounced negative effect on the organization (Beudeker, 2015). This distinction resembles job typologies in the literature that encompass *star roles*, whereby individual achievements make an important contribution to the success of an organization and mistakes have little effect, and *guardian roles*, whereby individual achievements add little to the success of an organization and mistakes have large effects (e.g., Baron & Kreps, 1999; Jacobs, 1981). The differential performance consequences of promotion and prevention tasks could potentially explain why employees and organizations tend to attach greater value to promotion tasks than to prevention tasks (e.g., Anderson, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2004; Beudeker, 2015; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999).

Following the more extensive conceptualization of regulatory task focus proposed by Beudeker (2015), we conducted a

pre-study among employees who rated both the input and output of selected tasks from the Netherlands Skill Survey (Ter Weel & Kok, 2013). This pre-study complemented earlier studies which generated promotion- and prevention-focused tasks based on input ratings alone (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). The resulting task categorizations of the pre-study were subsequently used in our main study.

### **Regulatory fit in the workplace**

In our main study, we investigate to what extent employees' regulatory focus actually matches the relevance of promotion-versus prevention-oriented tasks in their job. Research on person-job fit and the gravitational hypothesis has shown the importance of finding a match between one's interests, values, and abilities and one's vocational choices (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Wilk et al., 1995; Wilk & Sackett, 1996). Consequently, it can be expected that employees with a promotion focus prefer to perform jobs that are characterized by promotion-oriented tasks, whereas employees with a prevention focus prefer to perform jobs that are characterized by prevention-oriented tasks. Indeed, Sassenberg and Scholl (2013) found that regulatory focus predicts attraction to jobs with characteristics that correspond to employees' regulatory focus (e.g., offering opportunities for self-direction, security). As a consequence of this individual preference – and sometimes instigated by employers – employees are expected to move towards tasks that match with their regulatory orientation. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Employees' promotion focus is associated with a higher rated relevance of promotion tasks in their job.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Employees' prevention focus is associated with a higher rated relevance of prevention tasks in their job.

### **Regulatory fit and employee well-being**

Although it can be expected that employees generally gravitate towards jobs that match with their regulatory orientation, there are real life constraints to employees' abilities to realize such a match. First, the implications of leaving one's current organization to obtain a better fitting job is generally quite substantial for employees (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), and the ability to do so depends for a large part upon the availability of job alternatives (for a review see Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Moreover, employees' personal regulatory focus may not always be congruent with the regulatory orientation that the labour market requires, as many organizations seem to prefer promotion-focused behaviours over prevention-focused behaviours (Beudeker, 2015). Finally, even if individuals do feel that a better job would be available, they may sometimes lack the necessary career skills, such as communication and planning abilities, to arrange these positions for themselves in the labour market (Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Huibers, & Blonk, 2013). All in all, not all employees will be able to obtain jobs that have an optimal fit with their personal regulatory orientation. Therefore, our main study addresses the associations of

regulatory fit and misfit, between employees' regulatory focus and the regulatory focus of their tasks, with employee well-being.

The person-job fit literature demonstrates that congruence between employee and task characteristics tends to increase employee job satisfaction, job commitment, while reducing chances of work-related stress, burnout, and the intention to leave the organization (see for a meta-analysis, Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In a similar vein, experimental research on regulatory fit indicates that individuals experience more task enjoyment when the task goals are in line with their regulatory orientation (Freitas & Higgins, 2002). Moreover, their motivation is enhanced (Higgins, 2000; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998; Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004) and their task performance is better (Friedman & Förster, 2001; Keller & Bless, 2006).

Based on the literature with respect to person-job fit and regulatory fit, it can be expected that employees will report fewer mental health complaints and will feel more satisfied with their job when their regulatory orientation is line with the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks in their job. To illustrate this reasoning: the most effective strategy to accomplish a surveillance task (i.e., a prevention task) is a vigilance strategy (Beudeker, 2015). Employees with a prevention focus would therefore feel a sense of regulatory fit when working on this task, which allows them to use their preferred strategy. Such a fit may induce positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest, contentment), and a sense of personal mastery and significance, as they can use their preferred strategy to accomplish a task. In terms of person-job fit (Edwards, 1991), they experience a fit with respect to their abilities (i.e., abilities-demands fit) and with respect to their individual preferences (i.e., needs-supplies fit), which may eventually contribute to their mental health and job satisfaction (Edwards, 1991).

By contrast, the most fruitful way to work on a creativity task (i.e., a promotion task) is to use an eager and open strategy (Beudeker, 2015). In this case, employees with a prevention focus would not feel a sense of regulatory fit, because they need to adjust their preferred work strategy, which requires additional effort, may induce negative emotions (e.g., annoyance, fear), and may lower their sense of personal mastery. In terms of person-job fit, they may experience a misfit with respect to their abilities and individual preferences, which may eventually pose a threat to their mental health and job satisfaction (Edwards, 1991). Accordingly, our following hypotheses are:

*Hypothesis 2a:* Employees' promotion focus is associated with higher employee well-being (fewer mental health complaints and higher job satisfaction) when the relevance of promotion tasks in their job is high.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Employees' prevention focus is associated with higher employee well-being (fewer mental health complaints and higher job satisfaction) when the relevance of prevention tasks in their job is high.

Our hypotheses were tested in a representative sample of the Dutch working population, using data from the Dutch LISS



panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, the Netherlands; Scherpenzeel, 2011, see also [www.lissdata.nl](http://www.lissdata.nl)). As indicated above, we first conducted a pre-study in order to determine the regulatory focus of the key tasks that are relevant to the general working population.

## Method pre-study

### Participants and procedure

An online survey was distributed to employees in different functions and organizations, via the personal network of the researchers. We asked these employees to participate in a study about how they evaluate certain task categories. A total of 37 participants participated. Organizational tenure of participants ranged from zero to 18 years ( $M = 5.54$ ;  $SD = 5.09$ ). Participants performed a wide range of functions (e.g., researcher, coach, consultant, manager, receptionist).

### Instruments

#### Regulatory focus of tasks

Participants were presented with a list of 24 tasks from the *Netherlands Skills Survey* (NSS; Ter Weel & Kok, 2013), which is based on the British Skills Survey (Felstead, Green, & Gallie, 2002). The NSS originally includes 33 general tasks that people perform in their job, such as “giving presentations” and “monitoring to prevent errors from occurring or problems from arising”. Nine tasks were excluded in our survey, because these tasks would not refer to specific behaviours and were more related to individual characteristics (e.g., stamina, knowledge about specific products or services). To determine the regulatory focus that was associated with the tasks, we asked participants to rate both the input and output of the task (Beudeker, 2015). To prevent respondents from having specific associations, we chose to exclude the words “promotion” and “prevention” in the survey.

#### Regulatory focus of input

To assess the regulatory focus of the input of the presented tasks, we asked participants to indicate whether a task requires creativity, eagerness, and openness (i.e., promotion-oriented input) or vigilance, attention to detail and adherence to rules (i.e., prevention-oriented input; Beudeker, 2015; Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). Respondents could use a slider to indicate the degree of promotion or prevention orientation. They were also allowed to place the slider in the middle which indicated that there was no specific orientation required. The inter-rater reliability for this measure was high ( $ICC(2) = .95$ ).

#### Regulatory focus of output

Concerning the output of a task, we asked participants to indicate the visibility and consequences of good and poor performance for each task, following Beudeker (2015). Respondents could use a slider to indicate their answer on this question. One end of the slider indicated whether good performance on a task at hand is highly visible and has positive consequences for the organization, whereas poor performance on this task is less visible and does not have

major consequences for the organization (i.e., promotion-oriented output). The other end of the slider indicated whether good performance on the task at hand is less visible and would at best have a modest positive effect on the organization, whereas poor performance is highly visible and has negative consequences for the organization (i.e., prevention-oriented output). The inter-rater reliability for this measure was high ( $ICC(2) = .94$ ).

### Analyses

We calculated the regulatory focus of the 24 tasks by examining the scores for the input and output measures. Based on input and output scores, the tasks could in principle be sorted into four different categories (i.e., input and output promotion; input and output prevention; input promotion and output prevention; input prevention and output promotion). Per task non-parametric chi-square tests were conducted to test whether the distribution differed from an equal distribution among the four categories. We chose to classify a task as promotion oriented when the distributions of both input and output ratings clearly reflected a promotion focus. A task was classified as prevention oriented when the distributions of both input and output ratings clearly reflected a prevention focus. In all other cases (i.e., when the distributions of both input and output ratings did not clearly reflect a specific focus, and/or when the chi square tests were not significant) we did not classify the task.

### Results pre-study

Based on the chi-square tests and inspection of the input and output ratings (see Table 1), we classified 7 general tasks as promotion-oriented tasks ( $\alpha = .77$ ), and 11 general tasks as prevention-oriented tasks ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Six tasks were not classified. As shown in Table 1, all input and output ratings for classified tasks converged with respect to the regulatory focus that was concluded.

### Discussion pre-study

The results of the pre-study give us insight into the regulatory focus that employees associate with a number of general tasks that individuals perform in their job. Using a sample of 37 employees in a wide range of different jobs, we examined to what extent the required input and output of 24 tasks from the NSS reflected a promotion or prevention focus. By inspecting the ratings for input and output and conducting chi square tests, we were able to classify most tasks (18 out of 24 tasks) in our study as either promotion or prevention focused (Beudeker, 2015; Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). Seven tasks were classified as promotion-focused tasks. These tasks referred to instructing other people (e.g., training, presenting, selling), solving problems, and working with others in a team. Hence, our participants agreed that these tasks require creativity, eagerness, and openness, and that good performance (unlike poor performance) is highly visible and has major consequences. Eleven tasks were classified as prevention-focused tasks, including the identification of problems, monitoring to prevent problems,

**Table 1.** Regulatory focus of tasks, based on chi-square tests and input and output scores.

	$\chi^2$	Mean input score	Mean output score
<b>Promotion tasks</b>			
1. Instructing, training, or teaching something to others	<b>22.87</b>	.39	.19
2. Giving presentations	<b>31.24</b>	.41	.38
3. Selling a product or a service	<b>27.97</b>	.35	.52
4. Persuading or influencing others	<b>16.30</b>	.44	.41
5. Advising or assisting customers or clients	<i>12.60</i>	.20	.28
6. Solving problems	<b>13.41</b>	.27	.25
7. Working with others in a team	<b>25.03</b>	.42	.17
<b>Prevention tasks</b>			
1. Identifying errors or problems	<b>15.84</b>	-.30	-.45
2. Monitoring to prevent errors from occurring or problems from arising	<b>25.60</b>	-.40	-.66
3. Planning your own activities	<b>15.03</b>	-.14	-.41
4. Reading and appraising forms	<b>17.38</b>	-.41	-.41
5. Reading and appraising brief reports, letters, or memos	<b>25.16</b>	-.42	-.46
6. Reading and appraising lengthy reports, letters, or memos	<b>23.43</b>	-.40	-.43
7. Filling out forms	<b>16.30</b>	-.48	-.42
8. Adding, subtracting, multiplying, or dividing numbers	<b>15.22</b>	-.52	-.48
9. Performing calculations with decimals, percentages, or fractions	<b>17.81</b>	-.78	-.48
10. Using mathematics or statistics to perform calculations	<b>23.41</b>	-.39	-.33
11. Using a computer, for example, to enter customer data and print bills	<b>33.41</b>	-.54	-.39
<b>Unclassified tasks</b>			
1. Analysing problems	8.00	-.06	-.18
2. Planning other people's activities	<b>15.84</b>	-.01	-.11
3. Writing brief reports, letters, or memos	<i>10.43</i>	.04	-.24
4. Writing lengthy reports, letters, or memos	8.81	-.11	-.20
5. Using a computer to draw up documents, work with spreadsheets, search for information on the Internet, or send emails	8.00	-.20	-.29
6. Using a computer to design products, or to perform statistical analyses or complex calculations	7.19	-.03	-.17

$\chi^2$  printed in *italics* is significant at  $p < .05$ ;  $\chi^2$  printed in **bold** is significant at  $p < .01$ .

Positive input and output scores reflect a promotion focus, whereas negative scores reflect a prevention focus.

planning, reading and appraising documents, filling out forms, and performing calculations. According to our participants, these tasks ask for attention to detail and adherence to rules, whereby poor performance (unlike good performance) is highly visible and has major consequences for the organization. A total of six tasks could not be classified because the input and output scores did not reflect a clear prevention or promotion focus and/or because the task was equally distributed among the different categories. Examples of unclassified tasks were planning other people's activities, and writing brief/lengthy reports, letters, or memos. It is important to note that for classified tasks (i.e., tasks that were classified as either promotion or prevention focused) all input and output ratings were in strong agreement with one another (see Table 1). Moreover, we obtained a high inter-rater reliability on the task classifications while using a sample of raters within a wide range of jobs. We therefore conclude that the combination of input and output ratings may provide a robust indication of the regulatory focus of a specific task.

By considering the required input and output of tasks, this study complements earlier research which only used input ratings to determine the regulatory focus of tasks (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). Moreover, our categorization is based on the NSS (Ter Weel & Kok, 2013), which has specifically been designed to assess tasks that are relevant for the general working population. Hence, our categorization may offer a robust tool for researchers to determine the focus of a particular function. Our categorization also helps us to answer the central questions of our main study, concerning the extent to which employees have jobs that match with their regulatory focus and the associations between a match (or mismatch) and their mental health and job satisfaction. These research questions were examined in a representative sample of Dutch households.

## Method main study

### Participants and procedure

To test our second set of hypotheses, we used data of the Dutch LISS panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands). This panel is a representative sample of Dutch households and is based on a sample drawn from the population register (Scherpenzeel, 2011, see also [www.lissdata.nl](http://www.lissdata.nl)). Data with respect to regulatory focus were collected in 2011. Data containing work tasks, mental health, and job satisfaction were collected in 2012 at various time points. In order to obtain a sample from the general working population, we included respondents between 22 and 65 years of age, who had a paid job, and worked 12–80 h a week. The merged data set contained 1,606 participants.

## Instruments

### Regulatory focus

Regulatory focus of participants was measured with an 18-item scale (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). Items measuring promotion focus were for example "I often imagine how I can achieve my expectations and aspirations" and "I am more focused on achieving success than on preventing failure" (9 items,  $\alpha = .890$ ). Items measuring prevention focus were for example "In general, I am focused on preventing negative events in my life" and "I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my goals" (9 items,  $\alpha = .860$ ). Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all applicable*) to 7 (*fully applicable*).

### Relevance of promotion and prevention tasks

Participants were presented with the same 24 tasks of the NSS (Ter Weel & Kok, 2013). Participants had to indicate the relevance of these tasks in their current job ranging from 1 (*not at all important/not applicable*) to 5 (*vitaly important*). Based on the results of Study 1, we calculated two new variables: relevance of promotion tasks in current job (7 items,  $\alpha = .758$ ) and relevance of prevention tasks in current job (11 items,  $\alpha = .863$ ).

### Mental health complaints

Mental health complaints were assessed with the 5-item Rand Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5, Berwick et al., 1991; Stewart, Hays, & Ware, 1988). The scale ( $\alpha = .848$ ) included items such as "Last month, I felt nervous" and "Last month, I felt calm and peaceful (reversed)". Response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*continuously*).

### Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction was measured with six items, based on the DNB Household Survey (Teppa & Vis, 2012) and the Swiss Household Panel (Budowski et al., 2001). An example of an item is "How satisfied are you with your current job?". The other items referred to satisfaction with one's wages or salary, working hours, the type of work, working hours, atmosphere among colleagues, and career so far. Response options ranging from 0 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*fully satisfied*). The internal consistency was high ( $\alpha = .855$ ).

### Analyses

We first conducted Confirmatory Factor Analyses in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) to test our measurement model, whereby we examined a number of fit indices: the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Excellent fit is generally concluded if CFI and TLI are around .95, RMSEA around .06, and SRMR around .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). We subsequently conducted correlational analyses and tested our hypotheses using multiple regression analyses, whereby we simultaneously entered individuals' promotion and prevention focus. Because of the inter-correlation between the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks ( $r = .60$ ), the regression analyses were conducted separately for promotion and prevention tasks. The regression analyses were corrected for gender, age, education, and working hours. To examine the effect of regulatory fit, interaction terms were made between regulatory focus and the relevance of

promotion/prevention tasks, using the procedure recommended by Aiken & West (1991).

## Results main study

### Confirmatory family analyses

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses to examine our measurement model. We tested the proposed six-factor model, whereby the latent factors were allowed to correlate. Based on the modification indices, we allowed measurement errors to covary based on item content overlap (see Byrne, 2012). Note however that for reasons of parsimony, we let only a limited number of measurement errors covary (Kline, 2015). Specifically, we allowed measurement errors within the factor "relevance of prevention tasks" (i.e., #1–2 concerning the recognition of errors/problems; #5–6 concerning the reading and appraisal of reports, letters or memos; #8–9–10 concerning mathematical tasks). The 6-factor model did not have an excellent fit ( $\chi^2(1014) = 9566.037$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .759, TLI = .743, RMSEA = .072, SRMR = .079), but all items loaded significantly on the intended six latent factors and the fit was better compared with other possible models (see Table 2).<sup>1</sup> These other models included three 5-factor models in which regulatory focus variables, task variables, or well-being variables were represented as single factors, one 4-factor model in which individual focus and task relevance were combined per focus (i.e., promotion focus combined with promotion tasks and prevention focus combined with prevention tasks), and a model in which all items were collapsed into a single factor. Although the fit indices for the 6-factor model were comparable to 5-factor models in which individuals' promotion and prevention focus or the task variables were collapsed, the  $\chi^2$  difference test was in favour of the 6-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 38.796$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 396.887$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When we repeated the confirmatory factor analyses without correlated errors, the fit of our models declined (see Table 2). Nonetheless, the fit of the 6-factor model ( $\chi^2(1019) = 12,549.325$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .675, TLI = .655, RMSEA = .084, SRMR = .084) was better than

**Table 2.** Confirmatory factor analyses for study variables ( $N = 1,606$ ).

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$ vs. 6-factor model	$\Delta df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
<i>With correlated errors</i>								
6-Factor model	9566.037***	1014	-	-	.759	.743	.072	.079
5 Factors (regulatory focus combined)	9604.833***	1019	38.796***	5	.758	.743	.072	.080
5 Factors (relevance tasks combined)	9962.924***	1019	396.887***	5	.748	.733	.074	.078
5 Factors (well-being combined)	12,372.005***	1019	2805.968***	5	.680	.661	.083	.094
4 Factors (individual focus and task relevance combined, per focus)	14,756.457***	1023	14,746.891***	9	.613	.591	.091	.129
1-Factor model	22,390.348***	1029	12,824.311***	15	.398	.368	.114	.151
<i>Without correlated errors</i>								
6-Factor model	12,549.325***	1019	-	-	.675	.655	.084	.084
5 Factors (regulatory focus combined)	12,588.540***	1024	39.215***	5	.674	.656	.084	.084
5 Factors (relevance tasks combined)	13,016.765***	1024	467.440***	5	.662	.643	.085	.083
5 Factors (well-being combined)	15,355.385	1024	2806.060***	5	.596	.574	.093	.097
4 Factors (individual focus and task relevance combined, per focus)	19,626.090***	1028	7076.765***	9	.476	.449	.106	.135
1-Factor model	27,323.909***	1034	14,774.584***	15	.259	.226	.126	.157

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Significant differences in Chi-square indicate better fit for the 6-factor model.



the other models, and again comparable, but somewhat superior to the 5-factor models in which individuals' promotion and prevention focus were collapsed ( $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 39.215$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or in which the task variables were collapsed ( $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 467.440$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

In the analyses below, it is important to take into account that our best-fitting model did not meet the criteria for excellent fit proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999, see above). However, in order to incorporate the results of our expert study and to address our hypotheses, we decided to proceed with the six factors that resulted from this model.

### Correlational analyses

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations and inter-correlations of the study variables. Promotion focus was positively related to the relevance of both promotion and prevention tasks ( $r = .20$  and  $.18$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ). Prevention focus was not significantly related to the relevance of promotion or prevention tasks. Promotion and prevention focus were both positively associated with mental health complaints ( $r = .08$  and  $.36$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ), while prevention focus was also negatively related to job satisfaction ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, we found positive correlations between promotion focus and prevention focus ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and between the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks ( $r = .60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Regression analyses regulatory fit

Table 4 displays the regression analyses concerning employees' regulatory focus in relation to the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks, corrected for gender, age, education and working hours.<sup>2</sup> It was predicted that employees' promotion focus would be associated with a higher rated relevance of promotion tasks in their job (*Hypothesis 1a*). It appeared that promotion focus was positively related to the relevance of both promotion ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and prevention tasks ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 3.** Means, standard deviations (*SD*) and inter-correlations for the study variables (*N* between and 1,435 and 1,606).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4	5	6
1. Promotion focus	4.03	1.09	<b>.44</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>.20</b>	<b>.08</b>	-.01
2. Prevention focus	3.22	1.07		-.03	.01	<b>.36</b>	<b>-.19</b>
3. Relevance promotion tasks	2.99	0.77			<b>.60</b>	-.01	<b>.12</b>
4. Relevance prevention tasks	2.80	0.78				.00	<b>.11</b>
5. Mental health complaints	2.21	0.78					<b>-.29</b>
6. Job satisfaction	7.35	1.17					

Correlations printed in **bold** are significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 4.** Regression analyses with individuals' regulatory focus predicting the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks, corrected for gender, age, education, and working hours.

	Relevance of promotion tasks		Relevance of prevention tasks	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
<b>Main effect</b>	.031**		.016**	
Promotion focus		.20**		.15**
Prevention focus		-.11**		-.05

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

It was also predicted that employees' prevention focus would be associated with a higher rated relevance of prevention tasks in their job (*Hypothesis 1b*). Prevention focus was negatively related to the relevance of promotion tasks ( $\beta = -.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and was not significantly related to the relevance of prevention tasks ( $\beta = -.05$ , *ns*).

### Regression analyses mental health complaints

Our regression analyses concerning regulatory fit/misfit in relation to mental health complaints are presented in Table 5. Hypothesis 2a predicted that employees' promotion focus would be associated with higher employee well-being when the relevance of promotion tasks in their job is high. In line with this hypothesis, we found a significant interaction effect of promotion focus and the relevance of promotion-oriented tasks (i.e., promotion fit) on mental health complaints ( $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ). It appeared that employees with a high promotion focus reported fewer mental health complaints when the relevance of promotion tasks was high, whereas a reversed pattern was found among employees with a low promotion focus (see Figure 1).

Interestingly, though, we also found a significant interaction effect of promotion focus and the relevance of prevention tasks on mental health complaints ( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). It appeared that employees with a high promotion focus reported fewer mental health complaints when the relevance of prevention tasks was high, whereas a reversed pattern was present among employees with a low promotion focus (see Figure 2).

Combining the results of the interaction effects depicted in Figures 1 and 2, we conclude that associations between promotion fit/misfit measures and mental health deviated partly from Hypothesis 2a. For those with a high promotion focus, a better mental health is associated with a high relevance of both promotion and prevention tasks. For employees with a low promotion focus, a better mental health is related to a low relevance of promotion and prevention tasks.

Hypothesis 2b predicted that employees' prevention focus would be associated with higher employee well-being when the relevance of prevention tasks in their job is high. In contrast with this hypothesis, we found no significant interaction

**Table 5.** Regression analyses with regulatory fit measures predicting mental health complaints, corrected for gender, age, education, and working hours.

	Mental health complaints		Mental health complaints	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
<b>Main effects</b>	.126**		.126**	
Promotion focus		-.12**	Promotion focus	-.11**
Prevention focus		.40**	Prevention focus	.39**
Relevance promotion tasks		.02	Relevance prevention tasks	.02
<b>Interaction effects</b>	.004*		.004*	
Promotion focus × Relevance promotion tasks		-.07*	Promotion focus × Relevance prevention tasks	-.08**
Prevention focus × Relevance promotion tasks		.01	Prevention focus × Relevance prevention tasks	.03

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

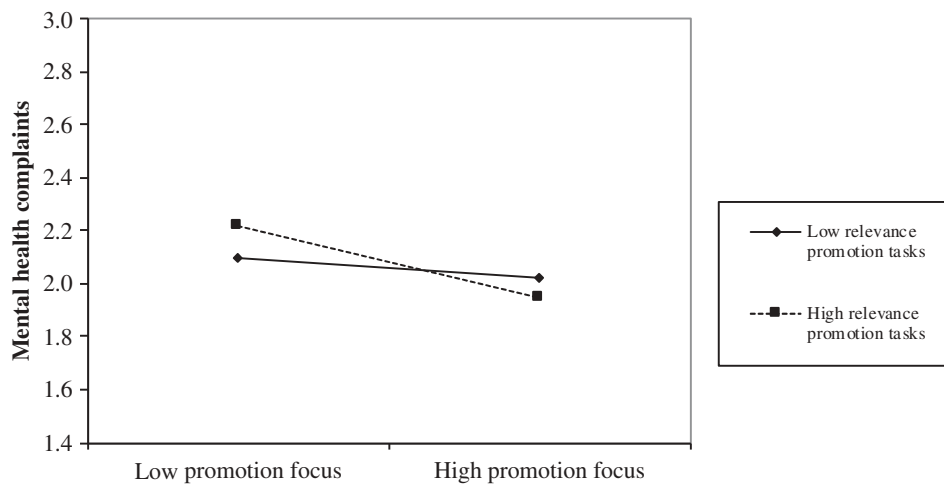


Figure 1. Interaction effect of promotion focus and relevance of promotion tasks on mental health complaints.

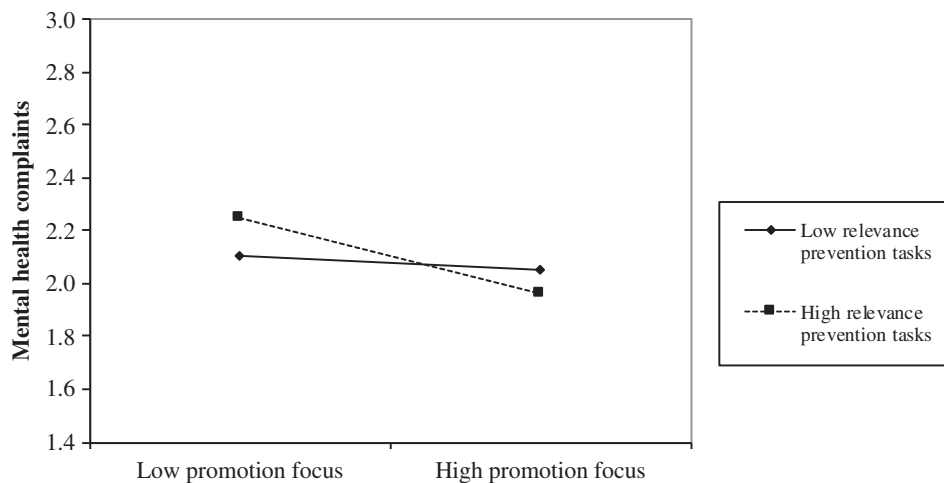


Figure 2. Interaction effect of promotion focus and relevance of prevention tasks on mental health complaints.

effects with employees' prevention focus on mental health complaints. Prevention-oriented employees generally reported more mental health complaints ( $\beta = .39/.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Regression analyses job satisfaction

Table 6 displays the results of our regression analyses with regulatory fit/misfit measures in the prediction of job satisfaction. We found no significant interaction effects of employees' regulatory focus and the relevance of promotion- or prevention-oriented tasks. Employees with a high promotion focus or low prevention focus reported higher job satisfaction ( $\beta = .08$  and  $-.22$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, both promotion and prevention tasks were associated with higher job satisfaction ( $\beta = .10$ , and  $.11$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ).

### Additional analyses using unclassified tasks

We conducted additional analyses, whereby we repeated our analyses for the relevance of unclassified tasks. The results were generally comparable to those obtained for the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks. The simple

Table 6. Regression analyses with regulatory fit measures predicting job satisfaction, corrected for gender, age, education, and working hours.

	Job satisfaction			Job satisfaction	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$		$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
<b>Main effects</b>	.049**			.050**	
Promotion focus		.08**	Promotion focus		.08**
Prevention focus		-.22**	Prevention focus		-.22**
Relevance promotion tasks		.10**	Relevance prevention tasks		.11**
<b>Interaction effects</b>	.002			.002	
Promotion focus $\times$ Relevance promotion tasks		.01	Promotion focus $\times$ Relevance prevention tasks		.05
Prevention focus $\times$ Relevance promotion tasks		-.05	Prevention focus $\times$ Relevance prevention tasks		-.01

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

correlation between the relevance of unclassified tasks was significant and positive for promotion focus ( $r = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and non-significant for prevention focus ( $r = -.01$ ,  $ns$ ). In the regression analyses, the relevance of unclassified tasks was positively associated with employees' promotion focus ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and negatively associated with a prevention

focus ( $\beta = -.08, p < .01$ ). Moreover, we found a comparable interaction effect between employees' promotion focus and the relevance of unclassified tasks on mental health complaints ( $\beta = -.06, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

This study examined regulatory fit/misfit in the workplace, and the associations between regulatory fit/misfit and employee well-being. In a pre-study, we determined the regulatory focus of general work tasks from the NSS (Ter Weel & Kok, 2013). In our main study, we assessed to what extent employees' regulatory focus predicted the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks in their job. Assuming that not all individuals may succeed in finding employment that fits with their personal regulatory orientation, we also examined the relationships between regulatory fit/misfit, mental health and job satisfaction. Our main study was conducted in a representative sample of the Dutch working population using LISS panel data (Scherpenzeel, 2011).

### Identification of promotion and prevention tasks

Our pre-study, using a sample of 37 employees who rated the required input and output of 24 tasks from the NSS, resulted in 7 promotion tasks and 11 prevention tasks. Promotion tasks referred to instructing other people, solving problems, and working with others in a team, whereas prevention tasks included the identification of problems, monitoring to prevent problems, planning, reading and appraising documents, filling out forms, and performing calculations. The finding that more prevention-focused tasks appeared than promotion-focused tasks is in line with Beudeker (2015) who state most tasks within an organization need to be done without making mistakes, within a set time frame, while good performance is hardly visible (i.e., prevention-oriented tasks).

By having employees assess the input and output of tasks from the NSS, which are relevant for the general working population, our study may complement earlier studies whereby experts generated promotion- and prevention-focused tasks based on input only (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). As the input and output ratings converged for classified tasks, the combination of input and output ratings seems to provide a robust indication of the regulatory focus of a specific task.

### Regulatory fit in the workplace

Using the selection of promotion and prevention tasks identified in our pre-study, we subsequently investigated the congruence between employees' regulatory focus and the regulatory orientation of their job, in a representative sample of the working population in the Netherlands, consisting of 1,606 participants. Promotion-oriented employees appeared to report a higher relevance of promotion tasks, prevention tasks, and unclassified tasks. We therefore tentatively conclude that promotion focus gravitates employees towards job with a richer task content, containing all three types of tasks. These results seem at odds with the notion of job gravitation (McCormick et al., 1979; Wilk et al., 1995) and regulatory fit

(Higgins, 2005). There is, however, earlier research indicating that individuals with a promotion focus are more attracted to jobs that offer opportunities for self-direction (Sassenberg & Scholl, 2013) and are more inclined to create challenges in their work (Brenninkmeijer & Hekkert-Koning, 2015; see also Tims & Bakker, 2010).

The associations between employees' promotion focus and the focus of their tasks may rather be explained in terms of regulatory relevance, instead of regulatory fit (Aaker & Lee, 2006; Avnet & Higgins, 2006). A regulatory relevance perspective would imply that individuals prefer tasks which lead to outcomes that are relevant to their personal, regulatory goals or concerns (i.e., self-growth vs. security). Indeed, our results could be interpreted as an "eagerness effect": those with a promotion focus may simply have been more open to all possibilities for self-growth, including prevention tasks and unclassified tasks. This would be in line with a key notion in regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) that there is an inherent connection between promotion focus concerns and eagerness. Eagerness refers to a strategic approach to maximize the presence of positive outcomes, to look for ways of advancement, and to minimize the chance that opportunities are missed out on, to keep possibilities open (see also Higgins, 2000). Hence, it could very well be that for promotion-oriented employees, prevention-oriented tasks and tasks without a specific focus offer additional opportunities for self-growth and advancement.

The simple correlations of prevention focus with the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks were not significant. When corrected for promotion focus, prevention focus had a negative association with the relevance of promotion (and unclassified) tasks, which may indicate a suppressor effect, but the association with the relevance of prevention tasks was again non-significant. This suggests that prevention-focused employees may not be inclined to gravitate towards prevention tasks. As such, these results do not correspond well with the concept of job gravitation (McCormick et al., 1979; Wilk et al., 1995) or regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2005). Hence, individuals with a strong prevention focus might not be particularly inclined to actively pursue matching tasks, or other tasks. This interpretation would be congruent with earlier research that reported no significant association between prevention focus and creating challenges in one's work (Brenninkmeijer & Hekkert-Koning, 2015). It would also be concordant with the assumption of Liberman and colleagues (1999) that prevention-focused individuals are generally less open for change. Perhaps, for these employees, the importance of having a secure job (see Sassenberg & Scholl, 2013) outweighs the importance of having tasks with a matching orientation. Our results could also reflect the behaviour of employers and supervisors in assigning tasks to their employees. Perhaps employers and supervisors do not take a prevention focus into account when assigning prevention-focused (or other) tasks. They might rather pay attention to employees' promotion focus, indicating a drive for growth and obtaining success, in their decision to assign tasks to specific individuals.

In conclusion, the results suggest that a promotion focus might gravitate employees towards job with a richer task content (containing promotion tasks, prevention tasks, and

tasks without a specific regulatory orientation). Prevention-focused employees do not seem to gravitate towards prevention-oriented or other tasks.

### **Regulatory fit and employee well-being**

Although we assumed that employees would generally move towards jobs that are congruent with their personal regulatory focus, we realized that employees may experience constraints in their search to achieve an optimal fit with their task environment (see Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). We therefore examined the associations of a fit and misfit, between employees' regulatory focus and the regulatory focus of their job, with employee well-being. With regard to promotion focus, we predicted that employees' promotion focus would be associated with higher employee well-being (i.e., fewer mental health complaints and higher job satisfaction) when the relevance of promotion tasks in their job is high. In line with this prediction, we found that employees with a high promotion focus reported fewer mental health complaints when the relevance of promotion tasks was high, whereas a reversed pattern was found among employees with a low promotion focus. However, those with a high promotion focus also reported better mental health when the relevance of prevention tasks was high. Our additional analyses with unclassified tasks revealed a similar pattern.

We conclude that associations between promotion fit/misfit measures and employee well-being deviate partly from our expectations. For those with a high promotion focus, better mental health was associated with a high relevance of promotion/prevention tasks (and unclassified tasks). Hence, these employees may not only pursue jobs with a richer task content, they also seem to experience a better mental health in this kind of jobs. The interactions for job satisfaction did not reach significance.

With regard to prevention focus, we predicted that employees' prevention focus would be associated with higher employee well-being when the relevance of prevention tasks is high. However, we found no associations between fit/misfit measures for prevention focus and employee well-being. Again, these results may seem at odds with theorizing and research on regulatory fit (Higgins, 2005; Sassenberg & Scholl, 2013) and job gravitation (McCormick et al., 1979; Wilk et al., 1995). The results are in line, however, with our finding that prevention focus was not related to the prevention orientation of employees' tasks. The resulting congruence – or incongruence – may simply not have been relevant to their well-being.

It is important to note, however, that prevention-oriented employees generally reported more mental health problems and lower job satisfaction. This may point towards a heightened vulnerability of prevention-focused individuals to experience lower well-being, which would be in line with the outcomes of a meta-analysis by Lanaj, Chang, and Johnson (2012) which showed that prevention focus is associated with neuroticism and negative affectivity. Neuroticism and negative affectivity have consistently been associated with lower mental well-being (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Watson & Clark, 1984). Moreover, it might be possible that the general current labour market values promotion-oriented employees more

than prevention-oriented employees. That is, employers may find it particularly important that their employees are innovative, and may view employees who point out risks as being difficult (Beudeker, 2015). These lower levels of appreciation for prevention-focused employees might subsequently lower their well-being at work. More research would be needed to investigate this reasoning.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations of this study need to be taken into account. First, our study has been conducted over a time period of approximately 1 year, but did not include repeated measurements. As such, our study cannot reveal actual patterns of job gravitation over time. A longitudinal study with several waves, covering a period of several years, would enable us to control for earlier measurements and for the stability of our constructs. This type of longitudinal design would also allow us to assess employees' movements across jobs and tasks (either self or employer initiated) and the long-term effects on their well-being. Additionally, it would be interesting to explore individuals' specific considerations for these movements. For instance, if employees experience distress from a misfit, this could subsequently result in the search for a better fitting job (i.e., reverse causation). Another interesting venue for future research would be to include the notion of job crafting, that is, the changes that employees make in their job, within the context of their job description (Tims & Bakker, 2010), as an alternative for job search activities.

A second limitation is that the promotion and prevention scales developed by Lockwood et al. (2002) have received criticisms for being associated with approach/avoidance orientation and the disposition to experience positive or negative emotional states, which is in contradiction with the original tenets of regulatory focus theory (Summerville & Roese, 2008). Moreover, Summerville and Roese have demonstrated that the prevention scale of Lockwood et al. is in fact unrelated to the prevention scale of the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire by Higgins et al. (2001), thereby raising additional concerns about the validity of the prevention scale by Lockwood et al. It would therefore be important to replicate our results with other measures of regulatory focus, for example, with the Work Regulatory Focus Scale developed by Neubert and colleagues (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008). More recently, however, it has been proposed that promotion and prevention focus, although conceptually different (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), are related to approach versus avoidance "temperament", covering performance approach/avoidance goal orientation and positive/negative affectivity, among other things (see for an overview and meta-analysis, Lanaj et al., 2012). Hence, an approach orientation and dispositional positive affectivity may be relevant factors that help explain why promotion-focused individuals have more relevant tasks and benefit more from these tasks in terms of mental health outcomes. In a similar vein, an avoidance orientation and a disposition towards negative affectivity might explain why prevention-focused individuals do not gravitate towards specific tasks and may generally experience lower well-being.



A third limitation of this study concerns the fit of our measurement model. Although the proposed six-factor model appeared to be the best-fitting model, it did not meet the criteria for excellent fit proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999). In addition, two 5-factor models (in which individuals' promotion and prevention focus or the task variables were collapsed) had a somewhat comparable, though less adequate, fit. It is therefore important to replicate our findings, employing more advanced measurements covering the regulatory orientation of individuals and their tasks (see also below). In addition, the measures for regulatory fit/misfit explained a relatively low proportion of variance. Although the proportion of explained variance can be a somewhat deceptive measure for the relevance of findings (Rosenthal & Rubin, 1979), we believe that the regulatory fit/misfit measures are in fact part of a larger set of variables, within the employee and his/her work environment, that relate to employee well-being.

Fourth, the use of self-report data regarding the relevance of employees' tasks and employee well-being may have biased our results (Conway & Lance, 2010). Although associations between self-report measures are not always biased in an upward direction (Conway & Lance, 2010), we believe that future research could benefit from employing more objective data. We would therefore recommend including the assessment of managers, colleagues, or external experts to determine the relevance of promotion and prevention tasks in a specific job, and to determine individuals' performance, as an additional outcome variable of regulatory fit/misfit.

### **Theoretical implications**

By connecting the concept of job gravitation to regulation focus theory, we aimed to refine our understanding of person-job fit in relation to more fundamental, motivational principles that guide human behaviour (Higgins, 1997). Our findings suggest that in a field setting, encompassing the broader context of work and career, mere congruence between employees' regulatory orientation and the orientation of their tasks (i.e., regulatory fit) might not be essential to their well-being. As explained earlier, interpretations in terms of regulatory relevance (Aaker & Lee, 2006; Avnet & Higgins, 2006) or eagerness effects (Higgins, 1997, 2000) might be more appropriate here. As such, our study may complement earlier studies that relied on experimental manipulation of promotion/prevention task environments (e.g., Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, 2000; Shah et al., 1998) and that generally linked regulatory fit to higher well-being.

Our pre-study points at the value of including both input and output characteristics in the conceptualization of task regulatory orientation (see Beudeker, 2015). Using this approach, more elaborate and robust indications may be obtained for the regulatory focus of tasks, compared with conceptualizations that solely encompass input characteristics (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). For future research, it would be important to incorporate a more fine-grained, subjective perception of the regulatory orientation of employees' tasks and to encompass the broader context of their tasks. For instance, solving a problem may be experienced as less prevention focused within a sales department. In addition, researchers may want to assess the extent to

which tasks would help employees obtain their personal regulatory goals (i.e., regulatory relevance).

### **Practical implications**

Our findings may have practical implications for the selection of new employees, and the promotion of employee well-being in general. Our results suggest that employees with a high promotion focus strive for jobs with a richer task content (containing promotion tasks, prevention tasks, and tasks without a specific regulatory orientation). They would also experience a better mental health in jobs with a rich task content. Although the relationships in this study were subtle and would need further replication, we would advise organizations to take the regulatory focus of potential and existing employees into account, in order to create the best possible match between employees and their jobs. Not all employees may need a rich task content to thrive in their job.

We also recommend organizations to investigate and address potential health hazards among those with a prevention focus. Prevention-oriented employees reported more mental health complaints and lower job satisfaction. They may generally be at risk for experiencing low well-being due to elevated levels of neuroticism and negative affectivity (Lanaj et al., 2012). Furthermore, these employees may feel insufficiently valued by their organization. Prevention tasks are widely present in jobs, as shown in our pre-study and in a study by Beudeker (2015). At the same time, successful performance is less visible for prevention tasks, compared with promotion tasks (Beudeker, 2015). The question is then, do modern organizations sufficiently value and reward their prevention-focused employees?

### **Conclusion**

Approaching person-job fit from regulation focus theory, this study has revealed a complex and subtle interplay between employees' regulatory focus and the focus of their tasks, in relation to mental health. Although our findings would need further replication and exploration, we hope that our results may encourage both researchers and practitioners to consider regulatory focus as a relevant factor for employee behaviour and well-being in the domain of work and career.

### **Notes**

1. The resulting factor structure of the confirmatory factor analysis is available on request to the first author.
2. We have repeated all regression analyses using scales which reflect the number of promotion, prevention, and unclassified tasks. These scales were created by dichotomizing the variables related to task relevance (1 (*not at all important/not applicable*) versus 2–5 (*not so important–vitally important*). The analyses yielded comparable, though somewhat less pronounced, results as our main analyses.

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